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Editorial

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Cultivation of ignorance

There is a long tradition of using congressional committees as instruments of intimidation, going back to the McCarthy era when Congress made a practice of dragging people before committees to ferret out supposed communists.

These days the bullying powers of Congress are being deployed against scientists who have helped us understand the vast and complex changes of global warming. A report in The Boston Globe has described how the chairman of the House Commerce Committee, Joe Barton of Texas, has launched an investigation into the work of three pioneering climate scientists.

Barton is among the Republican lawmakers who oppose mandatory curbs on gases that are creating the greenhouse effect and global warming. To admit the reality of global warming is to acknowledge the need for serious steps to head off global catastrophe. The other industrial powers are taking steps to address the problem. But the pollution controls and changes in technology needed to address the problem of climate change would cost money, and rather than accept that responsibility, patrons of industry continue to question the validity of climate change.

The three scientists who have been targeted took information from tree rings, glacial ice, and coral reefs to show in 1998 the dramatic rise in temperatures in the past 50 years in relation to the past 500. Following up on their work, a United Nations panel found that the 1990s were the warmest decade in the past 1,000 years.

Barton has asked the three scientists to provide documents from hundreds of studies in order to defend their work. He based his request on the fact that two Canadian researchers had questioned the three scientists' findings.

The intended effect of Barton's request, no doubt, is to make climate scientists nervous. Nobody wants to have to devote weeks of work compiling documents for the needless investigation of a congressional committee. Nobody likes having his or her life's work subject to an

inquisition even if one is fully confident of one's work. Barton's probe also raises the possibility that federal funding of important scientific work might be jeopardized.

That is how intimidation works. But not everybody is buying into it. The Republican chairman of the House Science Committee, Sherwood Boehlert, has demanded that Barton call off his investigation. Boehlert is among the brave Republican lawmakers who understand the reality of global warming and are willing to challenge the cultivation of ignorance practiced by climate ostriches such as Barton.

In addition, the president of the National Academy of Sciences wrote to Barton, saying that he would appoint an independent panel of scientists to study the matter. "A congressional investigation, based on the authority of the House Commerce Committee, is probably not the best way to resolve a scientific issue," he wrote, "and a focus on individual scientists can be intimidating."

Of course, resolving a scientific dispute is not what Barton really has in mind. Intimidating individual scientists is.

It is interesting that global warming is beginning to fracture the Republican Party. Progress on global warming will occur only after those with blinders, such as Barton, are forced to the margins of the debate. Unfortunately, many powerful people, including President Bush, remain as firmly wedded to a policy of ignorance as Barton is.
